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# Essentials in the Organization of Acquisition Work in University Libraries

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THE PURPOSE of this article is to give a brief summary of the essential processes which are involved in university acquisition work. Further articles will treat in detail the organization and function of each process. If much that is seemingly obvious is touched upon here, it is because our experience has shown that some of the more elementary and basic principles of acquisition are frequently misunderstood, especially by those who hold executive positions without having had previous experience in this specialty.

The preparatory processes by which a book is made ready for the reader are threefold: (1) acquisition; (2) cataloging; and (3) book marking and/or binding. In a small library, these activities can be done as a unified process by a single individual. In the larger libraries, where the volume of work is greater, the preparatory activities are carried out by separate departments. However, this segregation of work is made at a cost, for such division necessitates additional records and, to a certain extent, duplicate handling. The function of acquisition affects all departments, and their work in turn affects it.

Since all departments of the library make contributions to the work of acquisition, the acquisition specialist should foster and coordinate all such possible contributions. The function of an acquisition department is to acquire such printed or manuscript material as may be required to meet, not only the present, but also the future needs of the institution which it serves. This may be brought about by purchase, donation or exchange; but each of these methods demands certain prerequisites and involves certain definite processes. Among these may be mentioned: (1) educational policies of the institution; (2) book funds; (3) selection; (4) searching; (5) placing an order or soliciting; (6) receiving and accounting; (7) accessioning and/or marking to show ownership.

The physical layout of a department plays an important part in its effective organization and function. It will be noted that the current trend in large library buildings is to have the catalog department follow the public catalog, wherever that may be located, while the acquisition department is attracted to the receiving room, which is usually located on the ground floor or basement.<sup>1</sup> Adequate provision must be made for the receipt of mail, express and freight, as well as for

temporary holding of shipments awaiting invoices. There should be as part of the receiving room, or adjacent to it, a sizeable section of shelves to provide space for material received in quantity, which must be opened, examined and collated; gifts and other publications awaiting checking or decision as to their incorporation; duplicates awaiting final disposition and similar acquisitions. An outside loading or delivery elevator is an item of consideration, for many inland libraries receive shipments via carloading companies whose drivers are not required to make other than "store door" deliveries. The office layout of an acquisition department should contain a separate office for the chief, where book agents, faculty, and staff members may be consulted privately. Adequate quarters and equipment should be provided for searchers, serial checkers, gift and exchange assistants, typists, and accounting clerks.

#### *Belt Line Should Be Established*

Many libraries have failed to take advantage of what has been perfected in the business world in connection with business organization. Consequently, every effort should be made to have the latest office equipment and labor-saving devices: filing cases, dictaphones, visible file serial records, electric adding machines and calculators, as well as typewriters whose age is reckoned in months, not in years. Further, care should be exercised to see that the various processes involved in acquisition work follow in their proper sequence. From the time a title is considered until it is received in the catalog department, it should follow a path that does not cross itself. In other words, a belt line should be established, as in factories, where a product be-

ing manufactured does not cross back upon its own path or crisscross that path.

The various processes of acquisition are derived from the budget, which in turn is dependent upon the policies of an institution in regard to teaching and research. These policies and the present resources of the library determine fundamentally the kind of book budget upon which acquisition must depend. There are acquisition theorists who would allocate book funds scientifically, based upon a hierarchy or established subject fields and on the expected trade output in such fields.<sup>2, 3</sup> Such allocation may not be too unrealistic for the standard liberal arts college library, but for the specialized school and for the university it offers no assistance whatever. In universities, where the policies are defined, the distribution of the book fund follows as a logical sequence. All too frequently, however, institutions do not define such policies; or, if they do, the policies are not carried out. Often an institution is faced with the fact that the business school or the law school is its crown jewel, and that, consequently, the book collection in such a field must be kept standard or above par, regardless of other weaknesses in the collection. Where a "crown jewel" situation exists, the director of the library and the several department heads must face it and allocate book funds accordingly. (For a further consideration of this problem see the articles by Coney<sup>4, 5</sup> and van Patten.<sup>6</sup>) Budget making and the distribution of funds in a university library are a definite process, in which the university administrator and library advisers from the faculty work with the director of libraries and the heads of his several departments.

The selection of material is another

process in which the faculty should play a very large role. In fact, the effectiveness of the library depends upon the extent to which the librarian can organize his faculty so as to use their bibliographical and specialized knowledge in building up purposeful collections. One practical device for this type of organization is the use of the form illustrated (devised by Charles C.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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To \_\_\_\_\_

Please check one of the following lines to indicate your opinion as to the importance for the University Library of the publication noted on the attached.

C. C. Williamson  
Director of Libraries

- ☐ Very important—Immediate purchase recommended
- ☐ Important—Purchase recommended
- ☐ Fairly important—Purchase recommended if funds permit
- ☐ Of slight importance—Purchase may be deferred
- ☐ Probably worthless—Not recommended
- ☐ No opinion at this time—Would hold for more information

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_

(Signed) \_\_\_\_\_

Williamson), which can be attached to a book advertisement, a catalog, a book itself, or a periodical and routed with it to a member of the faculty.

It is by such means that the knowledge of a highly specialized faculty can be utilized in the acquisition of the subject material which scholars must have to do effective work. The acquisition department can be of great assistance by calling attention to old, as well as new, publications of possible interest to subject specialists. It knows, perhaps, more intimately

the interests of certain of its faculty members and can, therefore, more easily cope with the flood of catalogs and circulars. All departments naturally assist in the selection of material. The reference department, through the examination of its interlibrary loan requests and its daily work, is perhaps the most potent factor.

The role of the faculty in selection is primarily confined to separates, rather than continuations and serials. Once the faculty has made its decision, it is not necessary that these be placed back for annual review, but occasionally the faculty should be requested to make a new appraisal of all the continuation orders to see whether they are still worthy of being continued.

Once an item has been selected for acquisition, either because of faculty recommendation, or because of the unquestionable importance of the material, the next process is searching. The mistake should not be made of considering this activity clerical. In any large library the work involves not merely the checking of the pending files in the acquisition department, as well as the official or general catalog, but also a knowledge of the special and often uncataloged collections inevitable in most large libraries. Generally, the knowledge of such collections must include the ability to see their subject ramifications. A searcher should realize that a collection of British history before 1800 A.D. will probably include Americana, but such realization is no clerical process. Some comprehension of corporate entry and a familiarity with series cataloging must also be possessed. The searching of expensive items usually involves investigation as to their probable location in nearby libraries. Such a procedure will avoid duplication of the more special material

which may be available within reasonable distance. A competent searcher who systematically records the sources consulted will produce data which, when passed on to the catalog department, will considerably minimize their routine. Searching has other interdepartmental values as well. Because of the nature of the work, the searcher becomes one of the most frequent critics of the general catalog, reporting errors in form and filing, inconsistencies and other desirable adjustments. The alert searcher will also strengthen the collection by suggesting the purchase of essential bibliographies.

The fact that a desired item is not in the library and that its acquisition is authorized requires further action. It is here that the unique knowledge and ingenuity of the acquisition specialist comes into play. Shall the item be purchased, begged, or sought on exchange?<sup>7</sup> The decision may be based on the nature of the material. One probably buys a British government annual report, begs such reports from American government agencies, and tries to exchange one's own with sister institutions. The question may be raised as to the purchase of domestic material from a local bookstore or a national jobber. A problem in discounts and services arises, only to be settled in actual situations.<sup>8, 9</sup> In handling foreign purchases particularly, a knowledge of agents' specialties, prices, and service must be built up and often relearned. A familiarity with the possibilities of telephone, telegraph, cable, mail, freight, and ship communication is basic. Foreign orders and shipments call for more than superficial knowledge of declarations, consular invoices, customs brokers, importation laws and fluctuating foreign exchange. It must be remembered that the book trade is a commercial world in

flux, and no knowledge about it can ever be more than relative. We do not mean to imply that such knowledge is not possible and indispensable to the successful acquisition specialist, but that such knowledge is pragmatic, valid only in instances, and to be learned primarily in practice. Placing orders for books, dependent as it is upon an understanding of the book trade and other factors, is not to be trusted to the routine treatment given the purchasing of supplies for an educational institution. It must be performed by a subordinate under the control of the director of libraries. According to the law of some states, all purchases made by a tax-supported institution must be placed through its duly appointed purchasing agent. Libraries usually circumvent this by having the head of acquisitions also hold an appointment as assistant purchasing agent (in charge of books). The order forms used by the library can readily be adapted to meet the requirements of state purchasing laws. Although order forms will be treated in detail later, it must be emphasized here that clear and concise instructions to an agent may be the means of eliminating extra work in the department and thereby save several hundred dollars a year. Most agents will invoice and ship material in accordance with instructions, provided these are clearly and concisely stated.

#### *Financial Records*

In order to keep accurate financial records, acquisition departments all too frequently become involved in complicated and time-consuming accounting practices. Many such systems now in use were begun at a time when the library had a small appropriation, and where a little extra bookkeeping enabled the librarian



proudly to announce, at a moment's notice, the status of any given fund. Increases in their library appropriations, however, involving multiple funds and endowments, have brought little or no change in library financial methods. In recent years, mechanical systems of accounting have been adopted by most universities,<sup>10</sup> yet many librarians have refused to permit their budgets to be integrated with the general university system. These librarians labor under the mistaken idea that control of their funds will be lost if handled by the business office. In our opinion, the saving of staff time and the benefits accruing to the library through such integration entirely outweigh any theoretical "loss of control." In any event, experience has strengthened our belief that the accounting and most of the financial aspects of acquisition properly belong in the university business office.<sup>11</sup>

The receiving of material is an activity which is a continual challenge to the acquisition specialist. It will be found that the receipt of domestic orders is fairly routine. Nevertheless, libraries, whose invoice procedures involve special official and governmental regulations, find that their instructions are often disregarded by the smaller bookstores. One frequently finds that small bookstore orders for supposed separates turn out to be series parts, or that special bibliographical features required in a title are ignored, or a wrong copy delivered. Such irritations come to be expected and can be satisfactorily handled by routine correspondence.

Much time and expense will be saved when ordering "antiquaria" from foreign booksellers, if explicit instructions are given to the dealers regarding the shipment of desired items, especially if they are bulky, and more particularly if the

value is over one hundred dollars. At the time of ordering, a customs broker and a forwarding agent should be specified, and notification given that consular invoices are expected to be prepared where needed.

The accession book is the time honored method used by libraries to record volumes added to the library in the order of their receipt. For each item recorded, there is given a condensed description including binding, source and price. Since all this information, except binding condition, already appears on the order card and order sheet, many libraries have discarded the accession book and, in its stead, use either the order card or order sheets. Still others have found it efficient to transfer source, price, and order number to the shelf list card. This shelf list method is much to be desired. The necessity of keeping an accession book or of preserving order cards for long periods is thus eliminated.

#### *Some Special Processes*

When an item has been passed on to the catalog department, the work of acquisition is theoretically completed. The acquisition specialist is judged by his effectiveness with follow-up work, claims, acknowledgments, and careful supervision of the vital processes outlined in this paper. As would be expected, however, the activities of many libraries show a tendency to emphasize a specific acquisition process. One important university, for instance, is giving considerable time and attention to receiving through an exchange system many of its scholarly serials and checking on the whole scheme by careful cost records.<sup>12</sup> Another university has been utilizing its favorable position in a Scandinavian community to persuade the Scandinavian countries to help in developing its collection of their official publications.<sup>13</sup>

Still another is found to be concentrating some very logical thought on budget planning, to determine how to keep its very generously endowed book fund from distorting the nature of its already excellent collection.<sup>14</sup>

Many of the trial and error methods in university acquisition work would be eliminated if librarians, who have gained valuable experience in solving difficult or unique acquisition problems, would contribute articles which present, in detail, the reasons, methods and results of their particular activities. It is our intention to follow this preliminary paper with a series of articles treating in detail the organization of various acquisition procedures.

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